

NAINA'S VILLAGE



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by
Feisal Alkazi
with
Priti Jain
Jayshree Oza
Kaushalya Ramdas

CENTRE FOR SCIENCE AND ENVIRONMENT



To all those children from the city like Anusha and Abhay, who have so much to discover about the Indian reality.

This book is the first in a series of 10 books for children on environment. This project has been conceptualised by Anil Agarwal of the Centre for Science and Environment and aims to generate literature on nature-society interactions for children. It is based on a study of an actual village by the Centre for Science and Environment but names have been changed to protect individual identities.

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CHAPTER ONE

"Are you coming or not?" Abhay tugged impatiently at Anusha's sleeve. "Sunny said he'll be here in five minutes."

"But it's still so early, not yet seven."

"Okay, then I'll go alone."

"No, no, wait," a yell and a yelp of amused laughter filled the room at Hind Hotel, as Anusha quickly slipped an orange sweater over her *salwar kameez*. She was fifteen, tall and lanky, her expressive face often bursting into laughter as she teased her younger brother Abhay. Not that he was any the less as far as mischief went...

It was their last day in Bhainsoli a major stopping point on the way to Badrinath. Their *nani* and mother were visiting Badrinath, and since father was away on a geological trip, they had to tag along.

"Come, I'm ready," Anusha whispered to Abhay.

"Just have a quick cup of milk before you go," came their mother's sleepy voice from under a *razaai*. "And mind you're back by dark."

"Yes mum, don't worry we're carrying hot tea with us in the thermos."

"And Sunny promises to feed us well at his house," Abhay interrupted. "And Sunny will bring us back safely."

"And Sunnyand Sunny..... you can't think of anyone else these days," Anusha grumbled.

"If you don't want to come, you can still....." Abhay's voice rang out.

"Oh stop fighting you two and get going," said their mother in a loud whisper. "And mind Abhay not more than a roll of film, you know how expensive developing is and do remember to"

"Listen to your sister and do as she says," Abhay completed the oft heard sentence, closing the hotel room door behind them.

The wooden stairs resounded as they ran down with their thermos, camera, walking shoes and money.

Bhainsoli was already alive with activity. Little boys with milk cans, fresh vegetables gleaming in the morning light, and the constant sound of cutting wood from the many restaurants.

Anusha breathed deeply, taking in the clean, fresh mountain air, crisp and cold.

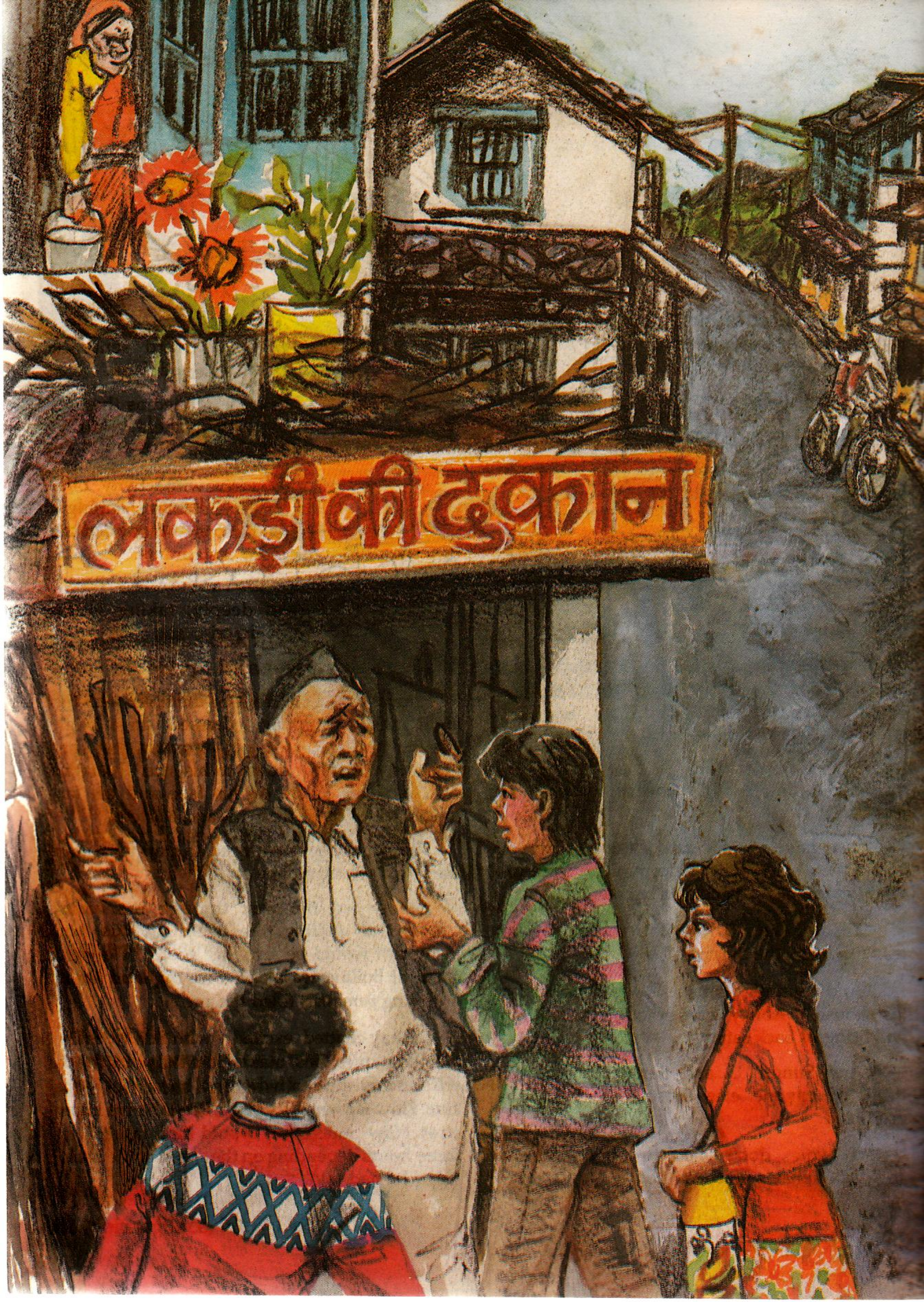
"Didi, *tayaar ho?*"

There he was in front of them, all four feet eight inches of Sunny, dressed in a bright sweater and a pair of old trousers that had obviously been cut down to his size. Imitation Adidas shoes were on his feet, and his face looked much older than his age, thirteen.

"Chalo, lets go. We need to stop for a minute to collect my money on the way."

Sunny led the way through the *bazaar*. Coolies sat waiting, the overnight bus from Joshimath would be arriving soon. The acrid smell of boiling tea along with the loud sound of frying *paranthas* filled the air.

Abhay chatted excitedly with Sunny, asking a million questions, making mental notes for the article he wished to write for his school magazine. How far was his village; Peeda? Five kilometres. How much time would that take? Two/three hours depending on the speed of the *shahari babus*, he had said.





Anusha glanced at her watch. If we're there by nine thirty, we'll have the whole day. What would it be like? Would she find something to interest her there?

Anusha and Abhay had met Sunny on their way up to Badrinath. Abhay had taken an instant liking to the Pahadi boy of his own age and spent much of his time in Bhainsoli with him. Of course, that wasn't his real name. It was Ram Lal but as the filmstar Sunny Deol was his favourite, he'd changed his name quite simply to Sunny!

Nani had not been too keen on their friendship with Sunny, but then as her daughter often reminded her, 'It takes all types to make the world.' And with Abhay and Anusha's dad being a geologist, who wandered around the countryside, she was used to the kids taking care of themselves from an early age. So, over lunch the previous day, they had managed to persuade her that being away for the day with a 'stranger' in an 'unknown' village was quite safe. Anusha thanked her stars she had a mother who understood.

"Chacha paise de do."

Sunny stood hand outstretched outside the wood shop that he regularly supplied. The plump owner looked up and then at the two children who accompanied him.

"What money? Didn't you take the full money yesterday?" he shot back.

"Yes, but you didn't have change. You said to come this morning for the five rupees you still owe me," Sunny said patiently.

"You always land up whenever you like demanding money. Should I be more concerned about sending off supplies to the hotel or your five rupees?" the owner shouted.

Abhay shuffled nervously on his feet, drawing back a step or two from Sunny. Anusha watched from close by. How rude the fellow is, not giving Sunny his dues, she thought. Sunny looked down at the dirt road, embarrassed in front of his new friends.

"Okay. Here take it, and bring some better wood tomorrow. I have no need for twigs. I want large logs, and if you can't get them don't bother to come. Think this is a charity organization..."

Sunny silently pocketed the dirty five rupee note as they walked on. The rude taunts of the owner soon died away. Sunny walked along silently, not meeting Abhay's gaze.

"How ridiculous to behave so meanly," Anusha burst out. "Don't go back to him Sunny. I'm sure others will buy your wood".

"Don't worry, *didi*. I just shut his rude words out. And he is right. I have mainly been giving him twigs and branches."

"But why don't you do something else? Get a job, join the army," Abhay said.

"But I'm not educated as you are. I've only studied till class five."

"What about here at Bhainsoli, a job in the Hind Hotel?" Anusha said, still smarting from the injustice done to Sunny.

"That means living here," Sunny replied. "A hotel or *dhaba* job pays little and means being available twenty four hours a day. Coming and going from Peeda with the firewood means only seven hours a day, the rest of the time I spend looking after the animals. And coming to town means I can buy things for home or sell the little fruit we grow or ..."

"Can't you buy stuff in your village?" Abhay asked.

"No *bhaiya*," Sunny burst out laughing. "There are no shops there, only a few houses. And don't worry about the firewood man. I've forgotten what he's said already. Come, let's hurry. It's a long walk to Peeda."



CHAPTER TWO

The bridge across the Alakananda was slim and long, suspended high above the waters that flowed deep below in the gorge. Anusha had expected something else — a motorable road — but here it was, just wide enough for pedestrians.

"The bridge? It was built just before I was born. It's the only one for miles around. My *nani* says four years before it was built there was a huge flood. The village of Belakuchi got swept away, many died."

"*Nanis*," sighed Anusha to herself. They're all the same, always rattling on about the past.

Abhay ran ahead of them, composing a photograph of both of them on the bridge.

"I can't get the river in. It's too far down."

"Doesn't matter, include the road," said Anusha. She looked back at the way they'd come. The road was a silver streak, the mountain side below it bare, without a single tree. Much of the cliff looked as though landslides had occurred. Totally different to the hillside that faced them, full of trees, with the path disappearing into a sea of green.

"Freeze. Thank you".

The click of the camera shutter suddenly sounded loud in the quiet mountains. Then there was only the roar of the distant river, the tinkle of an occasional bell.

Abhay's really enjoying himself, Anusha thought. And really so am I. Sunny's not as bad as I thought he'd be. And what will his village be like? And his mother? And what of his father? He never mentions him.

The boys clambered ahead. The steep path had begun, and as the grass and weeds were still wet with the previous night's rain, the ground was slippery.

Anusha recalled the time when they'd first met Sunny. It had been an eventful journey to Badrinath. Even though their driver Sher Singh was very good, the twists and turns of the mountain road had proved too difficult for him. The car had got a flat tyre on the way up, not far from Bhainsoli. Anusha and Abhay quickly pushed it to the side of the road, as an-



gry car and bus horns started up behind them.

While Sher Singh got busy with the tyre, Abhay pulled out the bag that had his camera. He placed it on a rock by the road, and unzipped it, pulling out the camera he had saved his pocket money to buy.

"What are you doing Abhay? We are only stopping for a minute," his mother called, rolling down the window.

"Just look at the mountains Ma, ideal material for our Environment Awareness week in school, such a few trees...."

"And look there's a landslide being cleared," Anusha added.

Abhay quickly framed a few photos and the click of his shutter was lost in the loud sound of traffic. Anusha leaned on the car. A young 'pahadi' boy made his way up the hillside, his back bent low under the weight of wood. Sher Singh wiped the sweat from his brow, putting the punctured tyre away.

"Come — quick, let's move on," her mother's voice ordered them back into the car. Abhay was a little distance away, his camera to his eye.

"Hurry, bhaiya.... "

Abhay ran to the car, and jumped in closing the door. The car lurched forward, its engine straining.

It was only when they were quite far down the road that Abhay realized that the bag holding his camera had been left behind.

"How careless of you really, delaying us even further," his mother grumbled. "Turn back Sher Singh. Imagine leaving such expensive things out on the road, we'll never find them..."

"Don't worry Maaji," Sher Singh reassured her, turning the car around, a smile on his lips.

As they turned the bend Anusha saw the fair *pahadi* boy she'd noticed earlier. In his hands he held Abhay's bag. His eyes sparkled and his hands waved delightedly as he saw the car return.

"Here it is. Here's your bag," the boy extended the bag to Abhay, who grabbed it as the car came to a stop.

Anusha and Sher Singh heaved a sigh of relief. Despite the cold air, sweat has broken out on Sher Singh's forehead.

Anusha's mother reached into her purse. "Thank you *bacha*, *yeh lo*."

"No, no there's no need," the boy replied, all smiles, shaking his head vigorously. "Glad to have been of help."

"Take this money. Buy something with it," she urged. In her hand was a crisp new ten rupee note.

"No need *maaji*, I work for my living. I'll be off now, I'm getting late to deliver this wood in Bhainsoli." The thirteen year old picked up his bundle of wood and walked away.

Why didn't he take the money? Anusha wondered.

"We *pahadis* have a real sense of pride," said Sher Singh smiling, as though he could read her thoughts. "*Kama kar khate hain*. I know. I belong to this place."

"Mama, that boy ... and I never thanked him ..." said Abhay as he put his camera away. "I just hope we meet him again."

Anusha looked back. The boy was already just a speck walking close to the edge of the busy road. Buses jam-packed with devotees wheezed past, loud *bhajans* spilling from their windows. Maruti cars zigzagged their way up the mountain. Occasionally, a window would come down, and a pale face would appear, leaning out to relieve the travel sickness.

Hmm, Anusha thought to herself, leaning against the side of the car, Imagine something like this ever happening in Delhi! Such a child would have demanded money, not politely refused it and walked away.

A sound of someone slipping and a loud 'Ouch' brought Anusha back to the present. Feet appeared, then blue jeans, then Abhay's red sweater, his hands clutching at passing

plants. He slipped down a section of the mountain path, releasing a mini avalanche of pebbles.

Anusha broke his fall as Sunny anxiously came down the path. Abhay sat up, sheepish and cross. "Stupid path," he said, trying to wipe the mud off his jeans.

"Are you hurt?"

A shake of the head.

"And your camera?"

"That's okay, Sunny was carrying it. I was telling him about my hobby of photography, when I suddenly slipped"

"*Theek ho Bhaiya?* Should we sit and rest for a bit?," Sunny asked with concern in his voice.

"MOVE OUT ! MOVE OUT ! Blocking the path, delaying the Government's work ! Silly children !"

The three young people looked up, astonished at the loud and rude voice. A thin, mean looking man stood behind them, a tiny man in a frayed grey coat and dark trousers, much smaller than the image his voice gave.

"MOVE OUT ! Can't you hear, or are you all deaf? Early in the morning I get up in the PWD guesthouse and there's a man there, waiting for me already. A leopard has struck last night, *Sahib*, killed my buffalo. I've come to fill the form for compensation'. I've hardly opened my eyes and the day's work has started. A long line of people expecting me to be everywhere at the same time. Come on — move out, don't delay me."

The man almost struck at them with his walking stick. He had a faded *jhola* on his shoulder and clutched an old green briefcase in his hand.

"Think I have nothing better to do, but march around these dreadful mountains? It was

the same in 24 Parganas. There those foolish *adivasis* and here the stupid *pahadis*. Don't know why they transferred me, nothing is better here, Eh, *bachhe* - where are you going?"

Sunny quietly said "Peeda," not meeting the man's gaze.

"And why aren't you in school? We start schools for you, but you never join them. Just spend the entire day stealing from the forest, like your parents. And you think that Government doesn't see? It does. And you two, where are you from?" The man pointed at them with his stick.

"Delhi," a cheeky reply from Abhay.

"Oh Delhi, that horrible place. I went there once to try and stop my transfer to Bhainsoli. No use. Everybody demands bribes and they're so rude...."

And what about you, thought Anusha. Aren't you rude? Silly man! Silly, foolish, horrible man!

"Don't waste my time, and yours too. Where are you going?" he barked.

"To Sunny's village - Peeda."

"Sunny? Who's Sunny? This boy - what a silly name," the man laughed meanly. "And go to Peeda. What a foolish thing to do. There's nothing to see there. Some broken down houses, some useless fields, some uneducated people."

"But, Sir," said Abhay, suddenly docile, "I am doing an article on changes in Peeda for my school magazine." There was a twinkle in his eyes.

"Changes? Then you should interview me. If anything has changed there its been due to me, not the stupid illiterate villagers. Take out your cassette recorder, I can tell you what I've done for them. Don't bother to walk all the

way there and back. It's a waste of energy. And the people are so lazy."

"Sorry, sir, no tape recorder."

Anusha watched Abhay with surprise. What had happened to him?

"Then take my photo. Print it in your magazine: The man who changed Peeda." He struck a pose.

"Sorry, sir, no film."



"Stupid boy. Wasting my time. The whole village is waiting for my arrival and you're delaying me, *hato, hato*."

The man pushed ahead striking at the shrubs that grew across the path. In a minute he had disappeared, and brother and sister burst into laughter.

"Why are you laughing?" Sunny asked quietly.

"Such a silly man. And talking such rubbish. *Hato, hato*." Abhay imitated the man's pompous manner and gestures. Anusha laughed till her stomach ached.

"And the way you teased him *bhaiya*, ha ha ha!"

Sunny stood by silently.

"What's the matter?" Abhay asked looking at him.

"He was being so rude about me and my people. And you find it funny." Sunny turned around and walked ahead. A silence descended.

"I'm sorry Sunny, but it wasn't what he was saying that amused me, it was he himself," Anusha explained.

"I'm sorry if we've hurt you in any way. We didn't mean to," Abhay added.

Sunny didn't reply. The three of them walked on silently for a while, higher and higher through the trees.

"A leopard has struck in the village, it must have been discovered after I left this

morning." Sunny was muttering to himself.

"Are there leopards in this forest?" Abhay stopped still in his tracks, looking around worriedly.

"No, no, much higher up in the reserve forest. But sometimes they come into the village at night, kill some animals and go away."

"I'd just shoot them with a gun," Abhay said, pretending to be brave.

"Don't you feel angry about it?" Anusha asked.

"The animals come into our land to get what they want, and we go into their forest to get what we want. That is their nature, this is ours."

Anusha couldn't exactly understand this easy acceptance of the attacks of wild animals.

"But you get compensation, don't you?" she asked.

"Very rarely. Its a difficult process. You have to come to Bhainsoli, report to Mr. Banerjee whom you've just seen, wait for him to visit the village, fill forms, find witnesses"

"Witnesses? How ridiculous, how can you find witnesses who will have seen a leopard striking?" Anusha asked.

"And why compensation? Is a buffalo so expensive?" Abhay looked confused.

"Yes, it is" said Sunny. We save money for years to buy one."

"And I'm sure Bannerjee feels paying this is like money going out of his own pocket. What a silly man and what a ridiculous attitude," Anusha said. "But can't anything be done to change the situation?"

CHAPTER THREE

They had been walking for almost two hours. Only one person had passed them on the way, a man from Tipli village carrying his beautiful baskets to sell in Bhainsoli.

Abhay had stopped looking out for leopards. The tiny stretch of forest they were passing through at that time had been left far behind. They'd since waded through a deep stream and then come upon terraced fields — narrow terraces rising in shallow steps climbed far up the side of the mountain. The amount of effort that the village people had put in creating fields in these steep mountains was truly amazing.

They walked along the fields with bright orange *ramdana*. Anusha was surprised to see a bunch of banana trees and *maltas* growing so high in the mountains. Her geography book at school always indicated these as growing on the coast or in the plains.

"Many people are now growing fruits to sell at Bhainsoli," Sunny explained. "We never had so many fruit trees a few years ago. But then the Dasholi Gram Swarajya Mandal gave all of us saplings to grow. They've done a lot of useful things for us."

"Are they the government?" Abhay asked.

"No, silly, *mandal* means any group or gathering," Anusha said in a teasing tone.

"Don't call me silly, you sound like Banerjee: silly boy, silly situation, silly everything," retorted Abhay, then stopped short looking worriedly at Sunny.

"Well, that answers your questions," said Sunny with a smile. "The government has done very little because a lot of it is made up of people like Banerjee, who think we are silly."



"But why was he accusing you of stealing?" Abhay asked innocently. "Can't you use whatever you want from the forest?"

"No, bhaiya, the forest belongs to the government." Sunny's voice had a tinge of bitterness. "If they want, they can cut and sell the trees to contractors for lots of money, but if we cut some branches for our own use or even to sell in Bhainsoli, it's called stealing. What else can we do? I don't even earn enough money for my mother's medicines."

Abhay walked ahead trying to understand what Sunny was saying. He opened out his camera case and looked through the lens at the landscape, searching for a good photograph.

Sunny and Anusha continued to talk about life in these parts. Sunny had finished class five the previous year. Wasn't he a bit old for that, she wondered. He felt he no longer fitted into life in the village, he preferred life in Bhainsoli, the attractions of the *bazaar*, and the possibilities of seeing the latest film at the video parlour in Koti. He wanted to go to Bombay, meet the stars: Govinda, Mithun and, of course, Sunny Deol!

"Let's take a short cut and walk through the reserve forest." Sunny led the way to the left, zigzagging through a flooded field with ease. Blue magpies, their tails flashing, flew overhead. Men worked at repairing the edges of a terraced field, piling mud to keep the soil in

place. Abhay followed the village boy wiser than his years. He grimaced as his feet sank into the slush.

"Ram Lal *bhaiya*, ohh *bhaiya*," the voice of a young girl rang out. "Come quickly, your mother slipped while collecting firewood. Where have you been? I've been on the lookout for you for over an hour."

A bright, perky voice and a face that matched it. A small girl nine or ten, with a stick in hand to keep her goats in order, and in the other a tiny pup, the cutest, tiniest pup you can imagine. Anusha liked them both instantly, the girl and the pup.

"And who are these people with you?"

"This is Abhay and that's Anusha, from Delhi. But what's happened to my mother?"

"She slipped. She's not hurt, but seems unable to stand. Not far from here. I was out grazing the sheep when I heard a loud cry. Come, she needs help to get back to the village."

The words tumbled out one after the other. Her eyes were wide and expressive, as though she was reliving the scene she had just witnessed. The dog in her hands had the same wide eyed look.

The three quickly followed the little girl who had not told them her name as yet, almost running through the fields.



CHAPTER FOUR

Sunny's mother lay half propped up against a steep slope, leaning against a large bundle of twigs that was still strapped to her back. Her complexion was pale and Anusha found her clothes different to what she had expected. She wore a dark woollen shawl as though a *saree*, fastened on each shoulder with a piece of old jewellery. She looked tired and exhausted.

Sunny ran to her, greeting and speaking to her in a language neither brother nor sister could understand. A quick exchange of words then Sunny tried to help her stand. She fell back with a low cry.

He sat down helplessly holding her hands, searching her face for a solution. Abhay stood by silently. Anusha felt powerless, being unable to help or change the situation in anyway.

"Oh! what shall we do?" wailed the little girl.

And as if in answer they heard a low whistle. Coming down the hillside above them was a man dressed in many faded shades of brown. "We'll fix that in a minute."

"Chacha, so good you've come ! Where have you been the last few months?" the little girl gushed.

"Hush, Naina! First let's set this foot right."

Without a glance at Abhay and Anusha, the man got to work. After quickly examining the foot he moved into the forest, searching below the trees for something. Fascinated, Anusha watched Lina examine some small shrubs, his fingers touching the leaves expertly. A grunt showed he had found the one he wanted. He picked a few leaves, and then from the leather satchel strapped to his waist he pulled out small balls of dark coloured stuff. He ground these into a paste between his strong hands and expertly plastered this onto Sunny's mother's leg, covering it with the leaves. She winced in pain.

"Durgadevi, this herbal poultice will help your ankle come back to health."

With a swift movement, he tore a strip of cloth and wrapped her ankle up tightly. The four children watched spellbound.

"Thank you, *bhaiya*". Sunny's mother sighed. The boy sat close to his mother, so she could support herself with a hand on his back. "Ever since Lakhpat Singh's death, we've missed all these wonderful herbal remedies, and that doctor in Bhainsoli is so far and so expensive. But where are your sheep?"

The man gave his low whistle again and over the edge of the hillside above appeared the faces of dozens and dozens of sheep.

Durgadevi moaned slightly flexing her foot. Sunny looked up quickly, watching her with sad, worried eyes.

"No, no, not yet. Rest a bit. There's plenty of time for us to get back to Peeda. And who are these friends?" The tall man gestured at Abhay and Anusha, who were still absorbed in understanding the sombre scene and all the actors in it.

"They've come from Delhi. We met a few days ago when their car stopped on the way to Badrinath."

"I'm Anusha and this is my brother Abhay," Anusha added to Sunny's brief introduction, trying to change the entire mood of gloom. "We were keen to come and visit you all and learn something about this area."

"Learn from us?" The man grinned, flashing a set of very white teeth. "But I always thought Sunny wanted to learn from you city people," he laughed.

Anusha decided she liked him, too.

"But there is a lot to learn from you. Especially about the secrets of the forest, your father's journeys into Tibet...and your many wonderful stories." There was a wan smile on Sunny's mother's face as she spoke.

"Oh yes, *chacha*, do tell us that story about the place where you bought the *botiya* dog," Naina chipped in. "Please, please, and also how there were many *palsis* at one time, and how the border closed and things changed, and, and..." She was out of breath excited and giggling.

"Would you like some hot tea?" Anusha asked Sunny's mother awkwardly, not knowing how to address her, and then added, "Maaji." She felt relieved she'd thought of some way to help.

"Yes, *beti*, I'd love some. In fact, we should be offering you some, you're our guest."





"Don't worry, we are carrying some," Abhay burst in, already uncapping the thermos and pouring out the steaming liquid. The little girl watched open mouthed as Sunny gratefully handed the cup to Durgadevi.

"But how is it still so hot?" Naina asked.

"It's a thermos - come have a look," Anusha called out to the small girl. The thermos has two walls and in between them there's a vacuum that keeps it..." her voice dried up wondering how to explain this scientific principle to the village girl.

The tall man came to her rescue, "Not unlike a sheep's fur Naina, that keeps it warm".

"And now tell the children about yourself," Sunny's mother urged the man as she sipped the hot tea. The little girl helped Anusha close the thermos and then set about examining Abhay's camera.

"Now where should I start?" The man linked his fingers and sat forward.

"*Palsi? Khark? Botiya?* All these sound like another language to me." Abhay blurted out. "Maybe you can first...."

"I am a *palsi*, a shepherd," he started in his deep rich voice. "In fact, the last shepherd in the village. When I was a young man, every year I and many others of our village would spend the five summer months either grazing the animals deep in the reserve forest in open spaces called *kharks*, or taking them to high Himalayan pastures. Before making this big journey my friends and I, all of us only twelve-thirteen years old would look after the cattle in the village fields, as they grazed and manured the land before the paddy was sown. And then one day we'd all leave the village together — my grandfather, my father, many other men and hundreds of sheep and goats, the sheep bleating in answer to the dogs who barked to keep them in place. We'd walk for days and weeks, higher and higher towards the Himalayan passes, the wind growing colder and sharper, biting at us in the dark nights, as

we made our way through the forest. After a point the trees would become fewer and we would see green pastures, where we would meet our friends, the *Botiya* traders, who came down from Tibet laden with precious goods."

"We'd unload the *mandua* and barley from the backs of our goats and exchange it for salt, butter, Tibetan wool, Chinese shoes and even gold, and of course, these beautiful yet fierce sheep dogs." He stroked the pup in Naina's lap. It watched him with bright eyes, biting occasionally at his fingers.

"We used no money then, only a fair exchange of goods. Those were wonderful times," he sighed. "And then the war took place with China, the border was sealed and the traders could no longer pass the border. So the entire trade stopped."

Anusha remembered her text books. The Himalayan mountains are so high that they stand above the tree line — the height after which no trees grow. Beyond this height are the beautiful Himalayan pastures, full of green grass, exquisite flowers and a unique, stunted rhododendron bush with beautiful white flowers. It was to these pastures that the *palsis* would take their animals to graze, she thought. Beyond these pastures the mountains rose even higher, their peaks covered with rock and ice. The Himalayan passes connecting India and Tibet were at such a height. It was from these passes that the *Botiya* traders would come and go into Tibet.

"And what did you do the rest of the year?" Abhay suddenly asked, enchanted by the *palsi's* story.

"Some years we'd travel down to Ramnagar in the winter, to trade whatever was left after the exchange with the *Botiyas* and in return get rice, *gur* and cotton cloth."

"But most often I'd go there," the last *palsi*, his eyes shining, pointed to the opposite mountain with its busy road to Badrinath. "There was no road then, not even a single bridge across the Alakananda. I knew the

mountain paths backwards and I would guide the pilgrims to Badrinath, Joshimath, Kedar-nath. Many people from our village worked together there, Naina's grandfather cared for the horses, others carried the *palkis*."

"At night we would stay in the little *chatties*. After the pilgrims had cooked and eaten their food, they would sing beautiful songs. I can still hear the *bhajans* of the Hindu pilgrims, the strong voices and rhythms of the Sikhs on their way to Hemkund, reciting their *Gurbani*, night after night as the journeys lasted four, five months."

The entire group sat entranced, listening to the *palsi's* tale. Anusha could almost see the gangly teenager striding after a lamb that had run away, calling it with his low whistle; or guiding the tired and weary pilgrims across the landslips and streams. How this had changed, she thought, looking at the bleak Badrinath road opposite. Now that there was a road, people rushed across to Badrinath in buses in a few days. Earlier the pilgrims would take months and in the process they would meet so many people.

Her *Nani* had told her a similar story of her first trip to Badrinath, a year before independence. Anusha had dismissed it then, "Oh, *Nani*, you and the good old days!" But now with what the *palsi* had to say, it took on a different significance.

Taking the sheep so far away into the Himalayan pastures and leading pilgrims on the road to Badrinath had been a source of livelihood for them, part of their annual cycle that balanced the needs of animals, man and nature. City dwellers like her *Nani* once depended on these men of the mountains and needed them to encounter this tough, natural terrain. But now with the Tibetan border closed, and the road cutting through all barriers to get to Badrinath, the mountain man had become unimportant, his job had become one of only catering to the needs of the city dweller, selling firewood like Sunny in Bhainsoli. How things change suddenly! And for no fault of these people, she thought.

CHAPTER FIVE

Slowly they made their way through the forest to Peeda, stopping occasionally to let Sunny's mother rest her foot. Whenever they did so Sunny and Naina ran about plucking small branches from two types of trees. These they stuffed into Naina's large basket, to carry home to feed the leaves to their animals.

Anusha and Abhay recognized none of the trees. Naina and Sunny started up a chant pointing to different trees and calling out their names, "*Khagsa, Bary, Chamkharik....*"

"But don't you have trees in your *shahar*?" Naina stopped short, turning to Anusha.

"Yes we do, but I don't know their names," Anusha sounded embarrassed.

"Then how do you know which burns longer as firewood, or which leaves to feed your animals?"

"We don't have firewood, we use gas," Anusha explained.

"And we don't have any animals," Abhay added laughing.

"Then how do you get your milk? And the dung for your fields?"

"They don't have fields or goats or fetch water from somewhere else," the *palsi* intervened. "It's a different life in the city *beti*, different and easier."

With a shrug of her shoulders Naina returned to her work. Anusha was glad for his explanation. She would have felt guilty explaining to this village girl how she just turned on the gas to cook, or didn't spend the entire day with her animals or in the fields or collecting firewood.

"That's a *ringal* tree," the *palsi* interrupted her thoughts. We use this tree in different

ways — to make agricultural implements, build the roofs of our houses, as fodder, even for making the basket that Naina carries."

"But are you allowed to collect *ringal* from the forest?" Anusha asked.

The *palsi* replied that all this was 'allowed' by the government but, of course, there were many things they did in the forest that were not 'allowed', such as cutting rhododendron trees to make utensils for butter extraction. "But what can we do? We have no other option," he added. "That is why the forest department people don't like us."

Then the trees began to get less dense, giving way to terraced fields, spotted with trees. All the trees looked the same.

Anusha, inquisitive as always, immediately asked, "Sunny, what are these trees?"

"Oh *didi*, these are *bhimal* trees. We plant them along terraces. They give us very good fodder for our animals when no grass is available in winter."

As they walked further, Sunny pointed out a small piece of land as being theirs. It looked barren, compared to the neighbouring fields where men and women were harvesting the paddy, piling the yellow stacks in large heaps. A little further he pointed out another piece of land.

"Different pieces in different places? Why is that so, Sunny?" Anusha asked.

"We have four different bits of land, *didi*," he replied, "in four different areas."

"But why not all in one place?" Abhay demanded.

"No one would be willing," the *palsi* replied, swiftly moving forward to guide his flock. "Our land yields grains in different amounts in different parts. This is because the land here is very poor. We have to use huge amounts of manure to get a good crop. It is easier to manure the fields that are close to our houses, rather than those far away. So every-



one wants a plot of land close to the village. When land is divided between brothers, they get one plot close by and a few plots further away. With every generation, the land gets more and more divided."

"Are they all so small?"

"Yes, *beti*." Durgadevi adjusted the rope that held the firewood load on her back. "Every son in every family wants a share of the good land, so our fields are small and scattered."

"But that piece of land, back there, had no crops at all," Abhay continued.

"That's because there's no one to tend that plot. Sunny spends much of the day collecting and selling wood and milk in Bhainsoli."

"Sometimes, in July and August, even more than one trip a day, mother!" Sunny added brightly. "Each trip brings at least eight to ten rupees. So in the high tourist season it's twenty rupees!"

Twenty rupees! Anusha thought, only twenty rupees to carry twenty kilograms of wood twice a day for ten kilometers, after spending hours collecting it. That's how much

two icecreams cost in Delhi! It seemed so unfair. She gave out a loud sigh.

"What are you sighing about Anusha?" the *palsi* asked. "We live in a difficult environment. Our old ways of life are coming to an end, but the new ones are even more difficult for us."

The villagers didn't seem as keen on meeting the *palsi* as Naina and Sunny had been. A few women greeted him, others wanted to shoo away his many sheep and goats, who climbed the trees to nip at the lower leaves. At one place he had to stay back as the woman of the house stopped cleaning grain to accuse him of having lost three of her sheep during the trip. He listened quietly and calmly as she shouted at him, her voice echoing in the quiet atmosphere.

Everyone in the village was hard at work. Feeding cattle, spreading out the rice husks to dry, pouring water into the troughs, piling up the dung. Curious eyes turned to watch them as they walked past.

Anusha and Sunny supported Durgadevi home. It was a small house, a few trees outside, two cows. In a corner was a large mud plastered bin to store grain and there were piles of firewood. There was also a cot in a corner and a calendar on the wall.

From a corner Sunny produced his prize possession, a transistor, on which he could hear his favourite film songs! His father had brought this for him, three years ago. That was the last time he had come to Peeda. He worked far away, in Allahabad, and sent money home irregularly.

"It's because of the firewood we sell, that we survive," Durgadevi said. "If we didn't have that money"

So Sunny was away all day, everyday, leaving no one to take their two cows out to graze, no one to tend the scattered pieces of land, no one to fetch water, fodder or firewood.

And now Sunny too wants to leave, like his

father, thought Anusha. She couldn't decide whether she considered him irresponsible or not, perhaps his education, however meagre, made him feel the need to move on in the world.

"Foolish! Foolish! Foolish!" It was the voice of that funny pompous Government man — Bannerjee.

The two boys ran off to locate him, promising to meet the girls later. Naina insisted that Anusha go with her to meet her *dadi* but Anusha was unwilling to leave Sunny's mother alone. She was already trying to hobble around the house and complete the many tasks on hand. Luckily a neighbour came by, so the two girls could leave.

As they came out, a group of boys in school uniforms was coming their way.

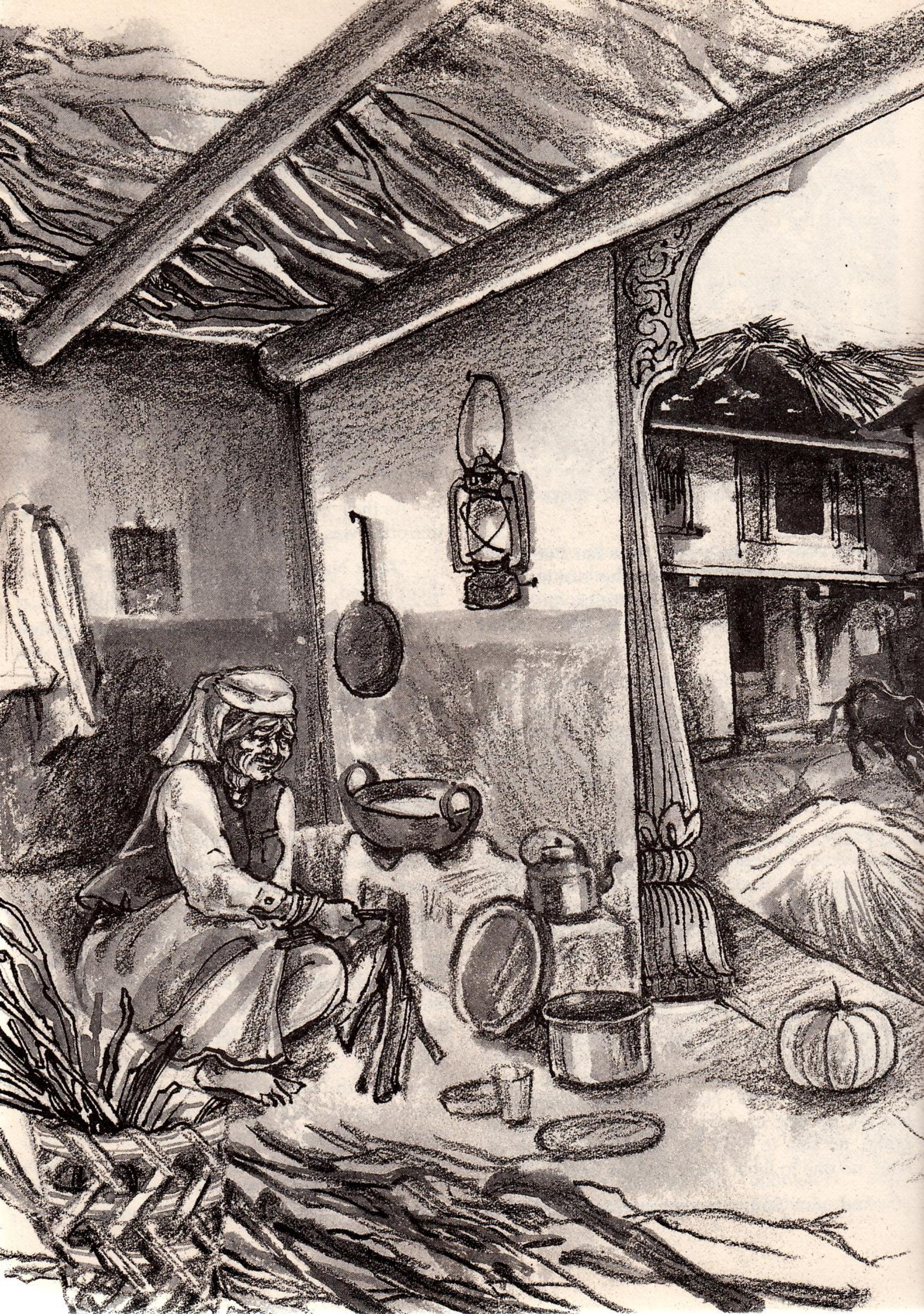
"Kyon Naina, not in school today?" one of them teased. "No time from your goats?"

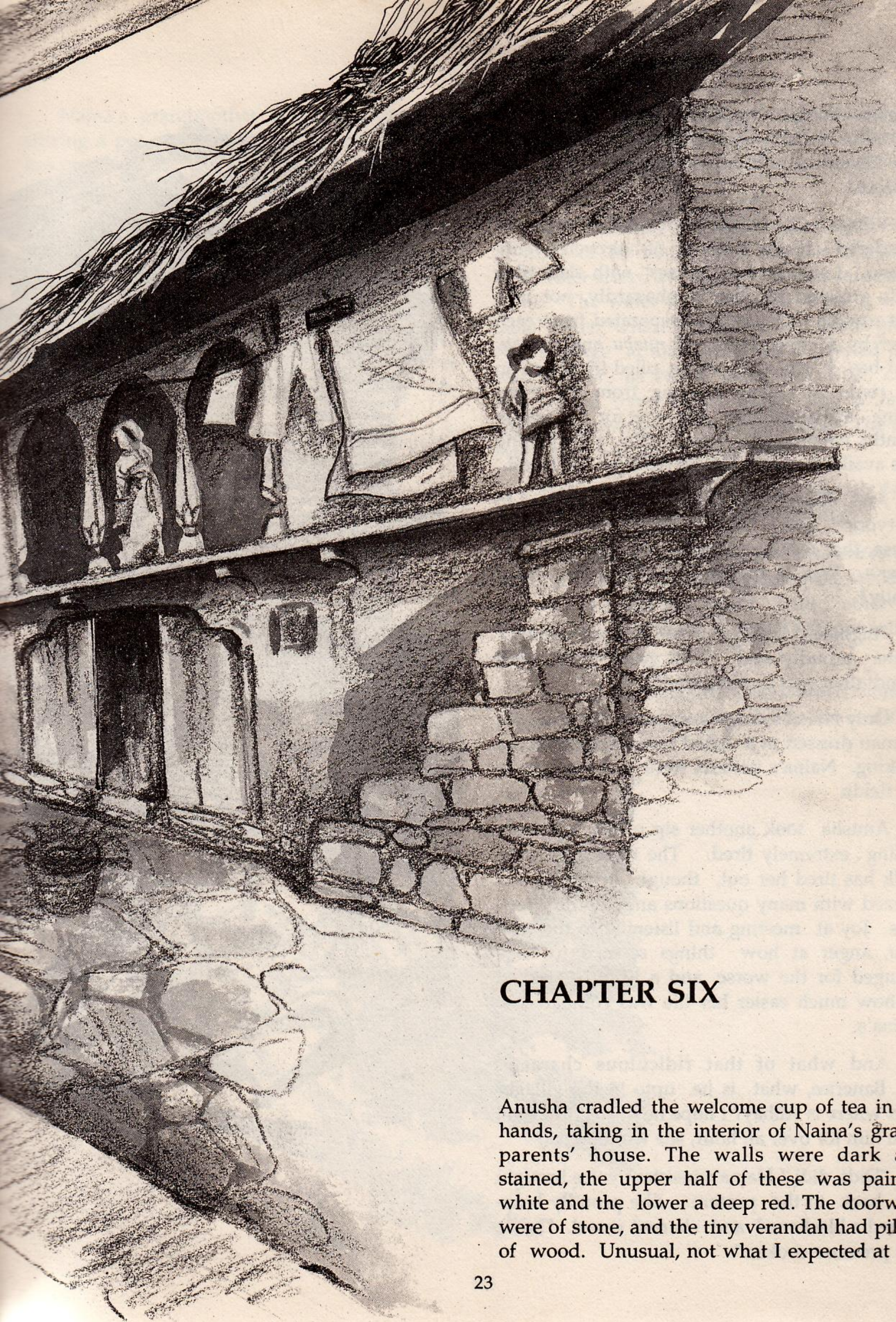
Naina laughed, moving ahead. The boys passed by, their big *jholas* heavy with books.

"What about the girls, Naina? I see no girls in school clothes" she asked.

"Oh no, we have no time for all that, too much work to do. Studies are for boys. After class 5, no girl goes to class. Do you still go to school, *didi*?"

"Yes Naina, in cities girls go to school, then to college. We have many things to make life easier — electricity, buses, roads," Anusha felt she lived a life of real luxury compared to Naina's. She could see that Naina really had no 'time' for school, busy as she was, collecting fodder, minding the goats, fetching water..... She really didn't know how to explain this difference in their lives.





CHAPTER SIX

Anusha cradled the welcome cup of tea in her hands, taking in the interior of Naina's grandparents' house. The walls were dark and stained, the upper half of these was painted white and the lower a deep red. The doorways were of stone, and the tiny verandah had pillars of wood. Unusual, not what I expected at all,

Anusha thought for the umpteenth time that day. But nothing has been usual about this trip. Even this village was not what she had expected.

Village? Could she really call it one, she wondered. It was made up of not even twenty houses. Long, narrow houses with slate tiled roofs grouped together haphazardly, not in a neat row on a street, but separated from each other by a few trees of *nimbu* and *naspati*. And hay, it was everywhere, piled in heaps on the roofs, and even hanging from the trees. Naina explained that this was for the winter months when fodder was scarce and nothing was available except oak leaves from the forest.

And everyone in the village was related to everyone else. This was Naina's *chacha's* house, that was her *bhanja's* and that was her sister's. Was it a village or just a large joint family?

"Eighteen families from here are related," Naina proudly said. "Our great, great, great grandfather was Gobind Singh".

Only Naina's *dadi* was at home, an energetic woman dressed in a faded saree, busy with her cooking. Naina's parents were out working in the fields.

Anusha took another sip of tea, suddenly feeling extremely tired. The three hour long walk has tired her out, though her mind still buzzed with many questions and contrary feelings. Joy at meeting and listening to the wise *palsi*, anger at how things seemed to have changed for the worse, and a little disturbed by how much easier her life was compared to Naina's.

And what of that ridiculous character Mr. Banerjee, what is he upto in the village? And where is Abhay? I hope he's safe. I haven't seen him for over an hour, she wondered.

"Didi, didi," Naina's insistent voice brought her back to the present. She proudly brandished a blackened and charred vessel. "Look, our pressure cooker."



Naina's grandmother laughed, vigorously stirring a pot on the fire. "Everyone in a city has one, *bachi*, its nothing unusual there. You know *beti*, when we first got it, it made such a loud whistle that I ran out of the house, frightened by this train like sound! And the first day the food all come out a mishmash. But now that we've got used to it, its quite useful."

"But where did you get this *maaji*?" Anusha was incredulous. Who would ever think a pressure cooker was being used here, here in a house without even an electricity connection.

"From the Chipko people, they've changed our lives completely."

Chipko! The Chipko movement. Anusha knew the word from school textbooks and assemblies. The women of Chipko, how she'd admired them when she first heard of them! The first ecological movement in the world. So these were them: Naina's grandmother and others like her in small villages like Peeda, who had found a solution to their problems and taught a lesson to the world.

"Come now, eat something," said Naina's *dadi*.

The food was simple - rice, *kadhi* and *sag*, but very tasty. Anusha ate her fill, Naina's *dadi* constantly piling her *thali* with the hot food.

After lunch the two girls washed their *thalis* in front of the house. There was no tap, just a little water stored at the bottom of a large container. The water they used fell into a vegetable patch, where pumpkins and beans grew. No wastage at all. The small cultivated area was a '*bara*', as Naina explained, with '*adoo*' and '*nimbu*' trees, a little barley and a *rajma* creeper growing over a *ringal* frame. The sole *malta* tree was heavy with fruits.

"Help yourself to some fruit," Naina's *dadi*'s voice called out. "And you too, Naina".

"You are our honoured guest, so we're getting the *malta*s," Naina giggled as she stood on her toes to reach the plump fruit, "otherwise we just never get to eat it. Its all kept for selling in the market.

Anusha was dazed. Overworked women, no electricity, and poverty. Peeda was so different from the city.



CHAPTER SEVEN

Thud, thud, rumble, thud.

"What's that?" Anusha asked Naina curiously.

"They are repairing the wall."

"What wall?"

Naina quickened her pace.

Rumble, thud, rumble, thud. A regular rhythmic sound interspersed now by a strong chorus of singing voices.

Anusha could not understand the song but was intrigued and excited.

The two rounded the corner and saw something that made Anusha stand stock still and silent. The rumble and thud were right here. Activity, laughter, song and work — a few men and a long line of fifteen to twenty women, young, middle aged and old, their clothes tightly wound around them carrying stones in the late afternoon sun. Stones that passed from hand to hand, large round heavy stones to repair what seemed to be a long wall. A wall that snaked its way across the fields as far as the eye could see.

"What are they doing?" Anusha asked.

"Look at this field dug up and destroyed by boar," said Naina. "Even the beautiful deer from the sanctuary come and destroy the crops. So the women in the village decided to repair the wall before celebrating *Jugaath* next week."

Anusha was surprised by the practical attitudes of these women. She looked around. Below the wall grew long grass which a group of women was already cutting. They squatted on the ground, the tall stalks falling before the firm circular swings of their sickles.

"What are they cutting the grass for?" Anusha asked of the young girl.

"To feed the cows, to feed the cows," Naina replied as if it were a song punctuating the rhythm with stamps of her feet.

"The city girl doesn't know that most of the work here is done by us women," said one of the women.

"What do the men do?" asked Anusha.

"Some of them do the ploughing. In fact, that's all they do other than drink or migrate and go to stay in the city. But who breaks the clods to prepare the soil for ploughing? Who sows the seedlings? Who harvests the crops? Who pounds the paddy?"

"Us women," the women replied.

It was now like a game — each of the women throwing out a question with a laugh.

"Who carries the manure from the cattle shed to the distant fields?"

"Who cares for the animals?"

"Who milks the cattle?"

They laughed flinging the questions between them Who cooks? Who gathers the wood? Who carries the loads of grass? Who.... who who.....?"

A smile began to play on Anusha's lips. She smiled as she began to understand the situation. It was a tough life for people here, and even tougher for the women. The men had mostly left the village to find work elsewhere. She marvelled at the way they made a living from this poor land. No wastage in any sphere, everything was 'recycled'.

The fodder, made up of grasses and leaves, was fed to the animals. The animals gave milk, and even more important, dung. The dung was used as manure and it made agriculture possible on this poor land. That is why

they were so dependent on the forests. If they could not get grass and tree leaves from the forests, their animals would not give dung. But the government did not understand this and kept stopping the people from going into the forest. They also planted numerous trees along their terraces to get fodder.

The straw that was left over in the fields after the harvesting of the grain was also fed to the animals. Everything was connected in the village to everything else. Forests were connected to animals, animals were connected to agriculture, and agriculture to people's food. Without any one of them — their forests, their fields or their animals, the villagers of Peeda could not feed themselves. It was just not a question of earning some money, as father did back home, and going out to buy the food. Anusha now understood what her teacher had told them of how dependent our villagers are on their environment.

Anusha also marvelled at the fact that the villagers had made so many innovations to conserve and recycle: from using kitchen water to water plants and grazing the animals in the fields for a few months before sowing the crop thereby manuring the land, to building this wall to protect their crops from wild animals. Her respect for the villagers' intelligence grew with every new experience.

Suddenly, Anusha's thoughts were disturbed. A low moan and a cry came from one of the women who squatted while cutting grass. She keeled over and lay on her side, pressing her hands to her lower stomach.

"Chameli, what's happened?" the group stopped working and gathered around her. Anusha peered anxiously over the shoulders of the concerned women, chattering now in low tones.

"I told her she was getting out of bed too soon after giving birth."

"It is only four days."

"But what can she do? There's no one to help in their house."

"And her husband is busy working far away in Kanpur. Couldn't get leave, he wrote."

"Better now? Lie still, we'll collect the fodder for your animals," one woman's voice rang out.

"We'll do it, give me her sickle," Naina also piped in, bright as ever. "You return to your work, *maasi*."

"We? Oh, you mean you and the city girl? Let her have a try." Ramvati's voice was a teasing challenge to Anusha.

The woman returned to their job at the wall. They started a new song. The song echoed in the mountains, its strong rhythm punctuated by the rumble and the thud.

The sickle was much heavier than Anusha had ever expected. Her arms ached as she swung it the way Naina demonstrated, inexpertly at first, but then growing more and more adept. Her eyes blinked back tears — tears brought on by the vigorous use of the muscles, tears of happiness as the rhythmic movement made her part of these strong women. She attempted to join them in their songs as they repeated them over and over. Her voice first stumbled on the unfamiliar words but slowly grew louder and louder. Singing made the task easier, she thought, easier and greater fun. She was really enjoying herself, joining this community of women in their important task.







CHAPTER EIGHT

Anusha was feeling on top of the world as they made their way to collect water, carrying the large empty plastic jerry cans.

Ahead of them was a tiny pipe sticking out of a tank from which water continuously flowed into a large slushy area. There were quite a few people there — young girls washing clothes, beating them on the nearby boulders, others bathing, even some cows drinking water.

“Oh Naina, where have you been all day?” one of the girls cried out. “You missed all the

GLOSSARY

Adivasi	- Tribal	Kyon	- Why
Adoo	- Peach	Kadhi	- A curry made of curds
Bazaar	- Local market	Maaji	- Mother
Bhaiya	- Brother	Malta	- Citrus fruit
Bacha	- Child	Mandal	- Meeting
Bhajans	- Indian devotional hymns	Mandua	- Flour
Bache	- Children	Maasi	- Aunt
Botiya	- A shepherd tribe	Nani	- Maternal grandmother
Beti	- Daughter	Nimbu	- Lime
Bary	- Tree	Naspati	- Pear
Bhimal	- Tree	Paranthas	- Fried Indian bread
Bara	- Homestead plantation	Palsi	- A shepherd who migrates with the flocks
Chalo	- Come	Palkis	- Palanquins
Chacha	- Uncle	Paise de do	- Give the money
Chatties	- Overnight resting place on a pilgrimage route	Pahadi	- A person from the hills
Chamkharik	- Tree	Rupee	- Indian currency
Didi	- Sister	Ramdana	- Lentil plant
Dadi	- Paternal grandmother	Razaai	- Indian quilt
Gurbani	- The writings of the sikh gurus - usually sung or recited	Ringal	- Tree belong to the bamboo family
Hato hato	- Move out	Rajma	- Kidney beans
Jhola	- Cloth bag	Salwar	- Ladies' trouser
Jugaath	- Local festival	Shahri babus	- City folks
Jhakh Devta	- Local deity	Sahib	- Sir
Kameez	- Long shirt	Saree	- Indian Garment
Kama kar		Shahar	- City
khate hain	- We earn to be able to eat	Sag	- Spinach
Khark	- Open space / meadow in the middle of forest	Theek ho	- Are you alright ?
Khaosa	- Tree	Thali	- Metal plate
		Tayaar ho	- Are you ready ?
		Yeh lo	- Take this

